

COMMUNITY DIALOG ON GANG ACTIVITY AND REVITALIZATION IN THE HERITAGE/ANNANDALE AREA

Meeting 2 Summary March 10, 2004

Supervisor Sharon Bulova opened the second meeting of the Dialog on March 10 with a wrap-up of the February meeting and an introduction of the speakers for tonight's program.

Supervisor Bulova asked the audience to keep two questions in mind while they were listening to the speakers: 1. How do we better coordinate and package existing prevention and intervention programs? and 2. What is missing?

The first speakers were Jose Vanegas, Lisa Alonzo and Juan Pacheco of Barrios Unidos (BU). Ms. Alonzo, a BU board member, social worker and member of the Annandale community, pointed out that only 60 youths at Annandale High School are identified as gang members, "wannabes" or associates. She said that is roughly 2.3% of the school's population. Ms. Alonzo emphasized that we should still pay attention to those children, but wanted to put the situation in perspective.

Juan Pacheco told the participants that he was an immigrant from El Salvador and, when he came to this country, there were not many intervention and prevention programs. As a result, he said, he joined a gang, lost the trust of his parents, lost a scholarship, lost his best friend and went to jail. Mr. Pacheco explained that kids do not join gangs for money, power and respect; they join them for love and a sense of belonging. He said the community has three enemies: denial, over-reaction and under-reaction (lots of talk, but nothing gets done). Mr. Pacheco said that young people need viable alternatives to gangs, namely jobs that teach character development and teach children to make better decisions. He said that BU teaches kids to love and have confidence in themselves. Mr. Pacheco finished his presentation by explaining all the programs BU has for young people.

Jose Vanegas, no longer with BU, said there is a disconnect between reality and what the media are reporting. He said that gangs are not running and controlling our neighborhoods. Mr. Vanegas predicted that the sensational media coverage will continue because it is easier for the media than digging into the issue. He pointed out that intervention, prevention and alternative opportunities for children will work in the long run.

The next speaker was Lt. Brian Boykin of the Fairfax County Police Department, commander of the school resource officer program. Lt. Boykin said that, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, 5.7 million people are under correctional supervision. He pointed to this as evidence that some people think we can arrest ourselves out of the gang problem. This is not logical, Lt. Boykin told the participants, because we don't have enough money or jail cells. He agreed with other speakers that prevention is the solution and pointed to the police department's GREAT program (Gang Resistance, Education, yada, yada, yada) as an excellent example of a prevention program. Lt. Boykin said that the GREAT program has been pilot-tested at two schools, Glasgow and Holmes Middle Schools, over the past two years, with great success. He said the pilot testing was made possible through a strong commitment from the police department and

significant support from Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS). He indicated that multiple schools across the county are requesting the GREAT program. Lt. Boykin went on to outline the goals, focus and classroom structure of the program. He finished his presentation by listing the program's next steps: train more police officers in the GREAT program, implement the program in more schools, and share the results and information with such groups as PTAs, middle school principals and the school board.

The next speaker, Clarence Jones of the FCPS's Safe and Drug-free Youth Section, listed all the gang prevention programs available from the schools. They are: the *Student Responsibilities and Rights Booklet*, gang and bullying awareness presentations, conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, class meetings (students and teachers talk about what's going on), school-community coalitions (22 in county), after-school programs in collaboration with other organizations, parenting workshops, K-12 curriculum on bullying and harassment prevention, new student orientation programs, individual and group counseling, MentorWorks (teachers and the business community), college partnerships and interest clubs (both during and after school).

The final speaker, Mark Emery, outlined the prevention activities of the Fairfax Partnership for Youth.

Following the speakers, Supervisor Bulova opened the meeting to questions from the audience. Rick Rio expressed the concerns of the Sierra Club about increased gang activity in county parks, but said that cutting trees in Ossian Hall Park was not an answer. One audience member pointed out that transportation was a big problem for after-school programs. Another participant said that a manager was needed to coordinate all the existing gang prevention and intervention programs. Mary Lipsey, a retired teacher from Ravensworth Farms, said that we need more youth involvement in planning these prevention programs.

Judith Miller, an Annandale High School parent and business owner in Heritage Mall, praised the mentoring program at the high school and called for more parent involvement in that program. Amy Gould explained that Computer Learning Center has 14 centers strategically located throughout the county, at which they provide computer access for young people from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. every day.

Supervisor Bulova adjourned the meeting at 7 p.m.